

OTTAWA | Nov. 23, 2015



## **The role Canada should be playing in Syrian refugee crisis**

By [SHIMON KOFFLER FOGEL](#) |

Published: Monday, 11/23/2015 12:00 am EST

Last Updated: Monday, 11/23/2015 11:30 am EST

Jewish Canadians remember all too well the vulnerability associated with being refugees, driven brutally from home and country. No person of conscience can be indifferent to those trapped in a vortex of violence and extremism. The horror sweeping across Iraq and Syria, and spilling over borders beyond, has gripped the Jewish community as it has all Canadians.

While Canadians rightly feel compelled to do something to assist those fleeing violence and persecution, our instinct to help those in need must be informed by a determination to do good rather than to feel good. Our collective focus needs to be squarely on what actions will be most helpful to those directly suffering at the hands of ISIL, Al-Qaeda, the Assad regime, Hezbollah, and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard.

The goal is to reduce conflict, diminish displacement and suffering, and protect the most vulnerable targets of extremist violence, like the Yazidis. This requires two intrinsically linked actions: the military mission to degrade and destroy the extremists and the humanitarian mission to aid refugees fleeing violence.

The valiant work of the Canadian Air Force in bombing terrorists is laudable. It is difficult to imagine an enemy in our time more vicious and deserving of military action than ISIL. However, this should not cause us to dismiss reasonable questions regarding whether air strikes are the most impactful contribution Canada has to offer. It would be perfectly credible for Canada to replace its current intervention with involvement of similar or greater value to the coalition effort, provided Canada's reprised role is welcomed by the international community as constructive, valuable and effective.

Similarly, it is entirely appropriate and necessary for Canada to do its part in addressing the refugee crisis, including welcoming the displaced and vulnerable to Canada. The same focus applied to maximizing the impact of the military mission should also be applied to the humanitarian effort. As Canada moves forward with the noble objective of settling 25,000 refugees, the government should ensure that its plan has the greatest possible impact on the vulnerable groups we so desperately want to help.

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, third state resettlement is not the preferred option, to be undertaken only when local solutions cannot be found. Canada should take in as many refugees as possible as quickly as possible based on an objective determination, not an arbitrary quota and timeline. This does not necessarily preclude the 25,000 by Dec. 31 target, but the overriding consideration must be "what would best serve the needs of the refugee population?"

Canada should work with countries like Lebanon and Jordan, which are dealing directly with the crisis on the ground, to determine whether Canadian resources, or

at least a portion of them, could achieve more by improving conditions for refugees in camps near the Syrian and Iraqi borders. In the long run, this could better provide what the vast majority of refugees want: a chance to return home when the conflict is resolved. CIJA has engaged in preliminary discussions with the King of Jordan to explore ways that Canadians can contribute directly to this cause, and we would welcome the Government of Canada joining us in this endeavor.

While every refugee applicant must be screened to ensure the safety of Canadians, security concerns should not be an issue in determining the total number of Syrian and Iraqi refugees to bring to Canada. In the wake of the horrific events in Paris, Canadians have been assured that the screening process for refugees is thorough. However, even if the end of year deadline is sufficient from a security perspective, refugee agencies in Canada have expressed concerns with the government's proposed speed of refugee intake.

Immigration and refugee agencies need time to ramp up their services, including accommodations, healthcare, education, training and social services to fulfill the needs of such a large group of newcomers. Additionally, integration programs will have to be established to help the refugees acclimatize to life in Canada and familiarize themselves with our pluralistic, multicultural identity and values. It is encouraging that the government has been consulting broadly with experts and immigrant aid providers here in Canada, coordinating with those who will be working on the ground with Syrian and Iraqi refugees when they arrive.

*Shimon Koffler Fogel is CEO of the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs.  
The Hill Times*